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Greenwood, Arthur

Labour's plan to abolish the slums

London

1930

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LABOUR'S PLAN TO ABOLISH THE SLUMS.

By

THE RT. HON. ARTHUR GREENWOOD, M.P.,
Minister of Health.

308
Z
Box 118

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Labour's Plan to Abolish the Slums.

Over 70 years ago John Bright said : " The nation in every country dwells in the cottage."

That is as true to-day as it was then. We have been accustomed to hear that the Englishman's home is his castle, but the home is a good deal more than that. The Englishman's home is the nursery of personal and civic virtues ; it is the institution above all others which, in its intimate day by day life, shapes the destinies of our people.

The housing problem, therefore, is not merely a problem of bricks and mortar ; it is one of providing proper conditions of life for a community which deserves it.

THE BLOT ON OUR CIVILISATION.

We all know how in every town and indeed in every village there are decaying houses, dark and damp houses with rotting floor boards and peeling walls, houses huddled together as though for very shame, houses teeming with people who are citizens or potential citizens of this country, living hidden away by more respectable buildings from the gaze of the passer-by.

The marvel is that so much good comes out of such unpromising surroundings.

There are other classes of heroes besides war heroes, and my heart goes out particularly to those extraordinarily courageous women who are fighting year after year against the dirt and filth of a slum environment, bringing up their families, looking after the breadwinner, often enough having to deal with sick children, who might never have been sick had they lived under better housing conditions.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE.

I am prepared to admit, as we all must admit, that very considerable progress has been made. Many of my predecessors, more distinguished than I, have helped to build up a housing code, and figures of housing achievement which no one would desire to belittle, but the truth is that to-day the people who need help most have received the least assistance. In spite of the enormous number of houses that have been built since the War the problem has in some respects become more complex and more serious.

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The problem of the present time, as I see it, is this : we have through the building societies, the Small Dwellings (Acquisition) Act and similar provisions, done a great deal, although much still remains to be done, for those who are able and desire to own the houses in which they live. We have made provision whereby local authorities may provide houses to let. These two methods alone, with the best will in the world, cannot cover the whole ground and cope successfully with the whole problem.

THE TASK BEFORE US.

The slum problem has never been effectively tackled. It is a problem which is becoming more difficult of solution year by year, partly because of the progressive decay of old slums and partly because of the creation of new slums.

Our progress in the matter of slum clearance has been deplorably slow.

In the 30 years before 1919, 75 schemes were confirmed.

In the 10 years since then, 121 schemes have been confirmed, of which 43 have been completed.

The number of houses and other buildings in confirmed schemes is approximately 15,000.

The number of persons whom it is desired to re-house is about 74,000.

The number of houses that have already been demolished is about 9,000, and the number that have been actually completed during the 10 years just closed is only 10,215—a tragically small contribution to the solution of a problem which has become more serious within the last 10 years.

It is, obviously, shortsighted of the nation to spend money on health services and to condemn people to live under conditions which create disease with which the health services are brought into existence to deal.

THE LAW'S DELAYS.

Why is it that, so far, we have been unsuccessful in dealing with this problem ? In the first place, I think it is due to the complicated law and procedure at the present time. For consider what has to be done to get a slum clearance scheme through and completed. The first step is taken by the Medical Officer of Health, who makes a representation. Following upon that, the Local Authority may make a declaration that the area is an unhealthy area. The local authority then prepares a scheme for the improvement of the area, the scheme is advertised, notices of it are served on the

owner, the lessees and the tenants. Then the Local Authority presents a petition to the Minister praying that an order may be made confirming the scheme. The Minister then holds an Inquiry, not always a very speedy process, and after that he may confirm the scheme either as it stands or with modifications.

The Local Authority is then at the very beginning of a slum clearance scheme, and not at the end. It will then proceed to purchase the property, either voluntarily or by compulsion, and proceed with the work of actual slum clearance.

It is obvious that machinery of that kind is too cumbersome to be effective. But, apart from that, difficulties have recently arisen from a decision of the Courts in what is known as the Derby case—Rex *v.* Minister of Health *ex parte* Davis.

The effect of this decision has been in many parts of the country to hold up further progress. That, I may say, is one of the matters to be dealt with in the Government's Bill which I introduced; and the position is made worse by another case in which it has been held that, contrary to what had been supposed to be the position, a scheme could be successfully challenged in the Courts notwithstanding that it had been confirmed by the Minister.

TOO LITTLE MONEY: TOO MUCH CONTROL.

The second obstacle is the existing grant and all that it involves.

It is quite clear, I think, that a grant of 50 per cent. of the estimated net annual loss on a Scheme is inadequate, because it places too heavy a burden upon our Local Authorities.

Further, because the net estimated annual loss is, as to half, borne by the Treasury, there follows inevitably a system of excessive control at every stage in the procedure of a local authority to clear a slum and maintain new houses subsequently. Every purchase of land or proposal to build, every contract for sale and disposal of land subsequently, all arrangements as to rent, have been subject hitherto to the approval of the Minister of Health. This meticulous and detailed supervision is both a discouragement to local authorities and an inevitable source of delay.

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT'S BILL DOES.

We must eliminate unnecessary procedure, we must secure more direct and less cumbrous arrangements, we must give the local authorities greater freedom and we must give them also greater financial assistance.

It is important, in addition, to tighten up, in some respects, the existing law, in order to make it more effective, and it is equally important to enable local authorities to stop the degradation of new districts towards the slum level. That is, broadly, what is proposed in the Government's Bill.

CLEARANCE AREAS.

In making an attack, and an ordered attack, upon slum conditions in our towns and villages, it is clear that the local authority must have in mind three broad classes of cases. There is first, the area which we call in the Bill **the Clearance Area,** an area which is so bad that complete clearance is the only satisfactory remedy.

What a "Clearance Area" is.

It is an area where all the houses are by reason of disrepair or sanitary defects unfit for human habitation, or are by reason of their bad arrangement, or the narrowness or bad arrangement of the streets, dangerous or injurious to health.

There may be, surrounded by such houses, patches of perfectly good property not injurious to health in any way. In such a case the good property would not be "in the clearance area" within the meaning of the Bill. It would be "land surrounded by a clearance area," and if purchased by the authority would be bought at market value (subject to the deductions now made if used for illegal purposes or overcrowded or in bad repair.)

How a Clearance Area will be dealt with.

An area may be cleared in one of two ways under the Bill. It may be cleared, first, by requiring the owners to demolish the buildings themselves, or, secondly, by the Local Authority purchasing the area and then arranging for demolition. The method of requiring the owners to demolish is a new one, and is frankly designed to enable Local Authorities, where they wish to do so, to secure the removal of a bad slum without being obliged to incur enormous capital expenditure on purchase and clearance.

If a Local Authority wishes to proceed by this method it will make a Clearance Order which must be confirmed by the Minister of Health. If objections are taken, then there must be a Public Inquiry.

But after an order has become operative it will then be the duty of the owners to demolish the buildings, and, if they fail to do so, the Local Authority is empowered to enter and demolish and recover the cost.

The cleared site will then remain with the owners, and they can do what they like with it, subject, of course, to the local by-laws and to any Town Planning Scheme which may be put forward. They have been robbed of nothing which was worth anything, and they still have their land. What could be fairer?

The other method is one whereby Local Authorities will purchase the land and themselves undertake the removal of the buildings on the site.

The procedure proposed now is somewhat more expeditious and simpler than under the present law, because it does away with the need for a formal scheme and entitles a Local Authority to buy the area by agreement or compulsion.

Where they are unable to buy by agreement they may make a compulsory purchase order, of which due notice, of course, must be given to all owners, and the order must be confirmed by the Minister, who must hold an Inquiry if there are objections. When the Local Authorities have bought the land they must proceed to demolish the buildings and appropriate the land for some purpose for which they have statutory powers, or dispose of it in some other way. In some cases, of course, they may wish to rehouse on the site or to retain it as an open space.

IMPROVEMENT AREAS.

Secondly, there is what I call in the Bill the **Improvement Area.** There are in all towns, and in practically all villages, aggregations of houses in varying degrees of bad condition. Large numbers of them are bad, some worse than others; generally badly arranged and generally over crowded. Often these are areas of considerable size. The houses are not all so far gone as to justify a wholesale clearance of the area. It is an area where, if the worst are dealt with, if the area is opened out and air and sunshine are let in, it could be made reasonably healthy.

It is clear that if public money is to be devoted to tidying up and purifying an area of this kind, the area must not be allowed to relapse again into its previous condition. Therefore, we propose that where areas are dealt with in this way, Local Authorities shall frame bye-laws to prevent any relapse into the old conditions which have been destroyed by the operation of the Improvement Scheme. The object of this, of course, is to get the Local Authority to deal with this problem, not in a sporadic fashion, but to look at it broadly and ahead, and to take deteriorating areas, mark them off,

deal with them in a proper order of priority, and tidy them up as and when they can, making it clear that once they are tidied up they are never going to become as bad as they were before.

THE ONE-HOUSE SLUM.

Thirdly, there is the problem of the **Individual Bad House** which happens to fall outside either the Clearance Area or the Improvement Area, but which ought to be repaired or demolished.

There will be cases in many towns, indeed, I imagine, in all towns, of individual houses or very small groups of houses, which will be outside a clearance scheme and outside an improvement scheme.

The general idea of the alterations which are being made by the Bill is to simplify and shorten the procedure for dealing with such houses.

Unfortunately, nowadays, when a Local Authority desires to deal with an individual house the procedure is such that, if the landlord chooses, it may be 18 months before anything can be done. That procedure, as I say, will be shortened and it is provided that the tribunal of appeal shall be the County Court instead of the Minister.

The Bill contemplates that individual houses which are unfit for human habitation should be divided into their two proper categories, namely, those which can be made fit, and those which cannot be made fit.

In regard to houses which fall into the first class—those which can be made fit—Local Authorities have the duty imposed upon them of requiring the owner to carry out the work necessary to make the house fit. If the owner defaults then the Local Authority itself may do the work and recover the cost.

Local Authorities are given power, in suitable cases, to advance money to owners undertaking repairs, because there may be cases where repairs are urgently needed, and in which the owner is, at the time, unable to meet the charge.

If, however, the house is unfit and cannot at a reasonable expense be made fit, then the Local Authority may make an order and enforce the demolition of the house.

Here, again, as in the case of the Clearance and Improvement Areas, it is not contemplated that Local Authorities should proceed with the demolition of unfit houses, unless new houses or alternative accommodation of some other kind is made available.

COMPENSATION.

In 1919, by general acclamation, the present basis of compensation was settled. It has operated for nearly 11 years. Local Authorities and property owners have become accustomed to it. Prices have been adjusted to it.

The case against any relaxation of the law of 1919 cannot be better stated than in the report of the Conference on Housing and Slum Clearance which was held by the Association of Municipal Corporations in November, 1929. The following clauses were adopted unanimously by that Conference.

> "We have considered the question (of compensation) further, particularly in the light of the criticism that the Section works harshly towards the owners of the property concerned. On this point we cannot but recall that the property has been condemned because the conditions existing in the area, and being due to the state of the property itself, are injurious to health. It must also be noted that since the present terms of compensation were embodied in the Statute the reduced value thereby placed on insanitary areas has become well known, and transfers of property have taken place on that basis of value. To alter that basis now would add a very large sum—a gift from the public—to the now recognised value of slum property. We think it not unimportant to add that we know of no modification that can be devised in the terms of Section 46 in favour of the property owner that would not add a considerable and and unfair burden upon the community."

I agree entirely with the view expressed in the above-quoted words; and propose to leave the law with regard to Compensation as it stands.

HOUSING PROGRAMMES.

The third part of the Bill deals with a more general question, namely, that of housing programmes.

It provides that, in the case of every borough and urban district with over 20,000 population, the authority shall this year, and in every fifth year, submit a programme of the housing work which they propose to undertake during that quinquennial period.

I believe that the effect of that provision will be to give us a continuity of effort and a definite scientific programme of house building such as we have not enjoyed before.

THE NEW FINANCIAL GRANTS.

We propose a new grant on a unit basis. The grant will be in aid of the activities of the Local Authorities in dealing with Clearance Areas, Improvement Areas, and the demolition of Insanitary Houses.

For each person rehoused—man, woman, or child—a grant will be paid to the Local Authority.

After consultation with the Local Authorities, and with their agreement, we have arrived at the figure of 45s. per year for 40 years, per person rehoused under this Bill, as the amount of the grant. In the case of a family of five that would mean a grant of £11 5s. per year for 40 years.

In two cases the amount of the grant is increased.

In the case of persons displaced from houses and rehoused in agricultural parishes the amount of the grant will be increased to 50s. per person for 40 years.

There is another exception which we have had to take into account. There are one or two places—they are not numerous, and London is the outstanding case—where the conditions are such that a considerable amount of rehousing must take place on the site where the people have lived before. Much as I would prefer to see our population spreading out rather than rising heavenward in their dwellings, one has to face the fact that, for a limited number of our people, who must live, or who desire to live in the centres of very large cities, tenement provision must be made. It happens that tenement provision is expensive and that almost invariably, indeed, I may say, invariably, when a Local Authority has to rehouse people on the site, in tenements—by which I mean buildings more than three storeys high—they have to do so on land which is tremendously expensive.

In these cases, we propose to give an additional 25s. per person for 40 years, or, in all, an amount of £3 10s.

The number of houses required to be built for the accommodation of the persons to be displaced, and on which the grant will be paid, will, of course, depend on their size and type. They cannot all be alike; some will have to be much larger than others. They will be fixed beforehand on the submission of proposals, and must be approved by the Minister.

AGGREGATE RENTS.

The conditions with regard to rents as far as the Local Authorities are concerned are these:—

They must contribute from the rates at least the equivalent, calculated on a 60 years' basis, of £3 15s. per house for forty years.

They will calculate the annual expenses of their new houses for sixty years.

They will calculate the annual equivalent for sixty years of the Exchequer grant and their own contributions.

They will subtract these grants from their own expenditure.

And the difference will be the amount they may obtain in rents, in the aggregate, from their new houses.

LOWER RENTS FOR POORER FAMILIES.

Within the limits of the aggregate rents to be obtained for all the houses under the Bill, the Local Authority will be given complete freedom. It must not draw in rents any more than the aggregate which I have described. Within these limits, it may *differentiate rents.*

A Local Authority will be able to charge such reasonable rents as it thinks fit, and to differentiate according to the ability of the tenants to pay.

I have left the precise method by which they shall work to the Local Authorities themselves. They will no doubt do it in different ways. Some authorities, I imagine, will have one nominal standard of rent for all houses, and make abatements in special cases. *Some authorities will make allowances, taking account of the number of children.* Others will probably build rather different houses on different sites, but the Local Authority will be free to determine the way in which it shall make the rent burden rest more easily upon the occupants of the houses.

If we take a fairly normal case, I think that it will be clear that a Local Authority will be able to let a substantial proportion of its houses at a good deal less than the rent charged at present.

I estimate that it would be possible in the normal case—I do not say in every case—to let half of the houses built under this Bill, on a broad average, at a rent at least 2s. per week less than the rents at present charged for houses under the existing scheme.

That will make it possible to accommodate displaced persons, as to one half of them, at any rate, in houses where the rent would be as low as 5s. a week plus rates, and as to the other half in houses at a rent of 7s. per week plus rates.

That, I think, will mean a substantial relief to the hard-pressed slum dweller.

MORE HOUSES FOR RURAL AREAS.

One object of the Bill is to secure more energetic and more comprehensive treatment of the rural housing problem. I know that there are Rural District Councils up and down the country which have done extraordinarily good work, but there are a good many others, owing, it may be, to apathy, or to

fear of the cost, which have done much less than they should have done. Some of them, no doubt, besides lacking resources, lack the requiste knowledge and experience on the part of their officials to deal with housing problems.

It is quite clear that the County Council ought now to have wider responsibilities in regard to housing than has hitherto been the case, and this is provided in the Bill.

Each Rural District Council this year is being required to forward to the County Council information with regard to its housing conditions and needs, and to do that every time the County Council asks it to do so. That will mean that the County Council will constantly have before it both the needs and the proposals of these minor Local Authorities, and power is given to the County Council to come in and take part in the actual work. The Bill, however, goes further than that.

Where a Rural District Council builds houses specifically for agricultural workers or people of substantially the same economic class, the County Council will be required to make a contribution of £1 per year for 40 years. That will spread some portion of the charge over the county for the provision of agricultural workers' cottages.

This is not a subsidy in relief of rent, but a subsidy to the Rural District Council in relief of rates. Instead of the Rural District Council, with its present depleted resources, having to meet the £3 15s., it will be required to meet only £2 15s., and a charge of £1 will fall upon the county.

In this part of the Bill, we are dealing with default powers as they affect Rural District Councils and County Councils. Provision is made for the exercise of default powers by the County Council where the Rural District Council does not do its work, and for the exercise of default powers by the Minister where the County Council does not do its work.

HOMES FOR AGED WORKERS.

The Bill allows the provision of houses for aged workers of a smaller size than those for which special assistance can be given now.

I feel myself that this is an experiment well worth trying, for two reasons. In the first place, it will be within the knowledge of many that old age pensioners are occupying houses which they have occupied for a quarter of a century, notwithstanding the fact that they are now grandparents and that their children have gone out to homes of their own; and anything which would take those aged people into other cottages would do something to relieve

the congestion in the big towns. It would make available family houses for family needs. Moreover, it is mere justice to the aged people to provide them with houses which will be easier for the aged to live in comfortably than the houses which they at present occupy.

Anyone who has visited the truly beautiful homes for the aged provided by the Durham Miners' Federation will feel that this example might well be followed by Local Authorities.

These houses, will, of course, be small houses. If so be that I receive an old age pension myself, my requirements will be modest. A room in which to live and a room in which to sleep will be all that one requires, and so long as these cottages, these aged workers' homes, are owned by the Local Authorities, and the grant is payable on condition that only aged people live in them, we can dispense with the present minimum conditions and build smaller dwellings for them. Of course, that will mean smaller costs ; in fact, what we are doing is to pay here two-thirds of the contribution paid under the 1924 Act, and the subsidy in this case, therefore, will be £5 per year for 40 years.

THE CONQUEST OF THE SLUMS.

I hope that the Local Authorities, with whom I have endeavoured to work during recent months in the closest harmony and co-operation, will receive this Bill, when it is on the Statute Book, with both hands and extract from it 100 per cent. of what value it contains.

I hope they will now, with a new Measure in their hands, pursue to the very end, with real vigour, with zeal, and with determination, the final conquest of the slums.

I believe they will, and I believe they will have behind them the active support of a large body of public opinion.

Now that, by common consent of all sections of opinion in this country, a definite, concerted attack is being made on the slum problem, I think we should agree that there must be no truce until the very end and until the slums have been completely destroyed.

It is a struggle which from now onwards will, I hope, be waged ceaselessly and relentlessly, until the last hovel sinks into the earth and the last overcrowded family has a decent home. When that day comes, whatever it may have cost in treasure, the nation will have rid itself of a gigantic burden of disease, of misery, of degradation, and will have done what it ought to have done before, and laid truly one of the essential foundations of a civilised society—the homes of the people.

5/30/5.

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